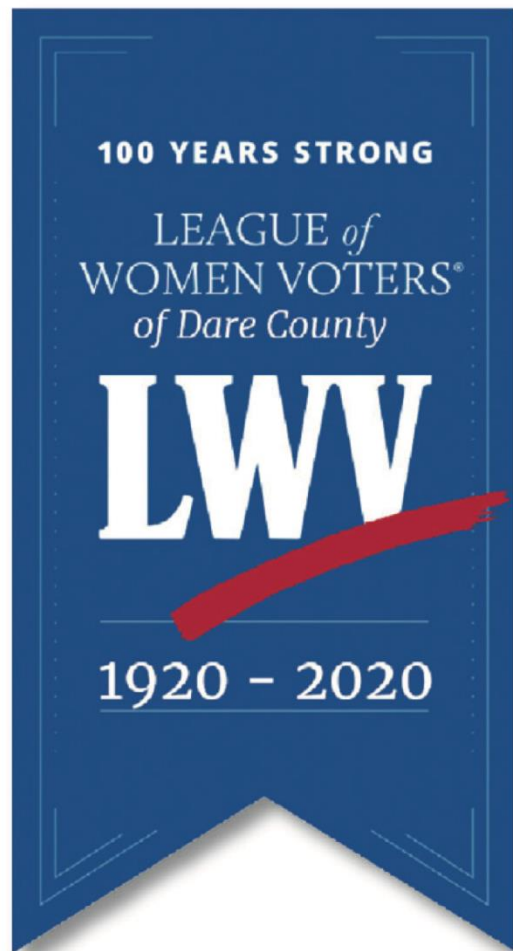


THE SUFFRAGISTS AND THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS
A BRIEF HISTORY



ON THE OCCASION OF THE CENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY
OF THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF DARE COUNTY

They who say that women do not desire the right of suffrage, that they prefer masculine domination to self-government, falsify every page of history, every fact in human experience. It has taken the whole power of the civil and canon law to hold woman in the subordinate position which it is said she willingly accepts.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

The 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution states,

“The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex”.’

This history making amendment was ratified one hundred years ago this year (2020). Beginning in 1848, at the first women’s convention at Seneca Falls, NY, and until the franchise was secured on August, 20 1920, in Nashville, TN, Suffragists fought long and hard to secure this fundamental right. They created organizations, spoke in public, paraded in protest, and published newspapers. They were jailed, endured violence, ridiculed, accused of being unpatriotic, and dismissed as mentally deranged. Still they persisted and on November 2, 1920 over eight million American women voted for the very first time.

The Suffragists had predicted there would be a need for an organization that would support and educate new voters. They reorganized to create the League of Women Voters in 1920. The League envisioned a democracy where everyone had the desire, the right, the knowledge, and the confidence to participate. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a young mother of seven, believed the vote to be essential if women were to participate equally in American democracy. She set out to change her status as a woman in America and consequently changed the world.



The seventy-two year crusade for the right to vote was begun when Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the first women's convention held in the U.S. at Seneca Falls, NY. In 1848, Stanton wrote the guiding document for the Convention, "Declaration of Sentiments and Grievances." Stanton modeled her "Declaration" after Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. She wanted to include in her document the demand for women's right to vote, but her husband and mentor believed including women's suffrage would make the Convention look "ridiculous." Stanton stood her ground, went to the podium and read, "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and **women** are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The Declaration of Sentiments was passed with more than one hundred votes.

Stanton was committed to women's rights. She wrote,

The general discontent I felt with woman's position as wife, housekeeper, physician, and spiritual guide, the chaotic conditions into which everything fell without her constant supervision, and the wearied, anxious look of the majority of women, impressed me with a strong feeling that some active measures should be taken to remedy the wrongs of society in general, and of women in particular.

She became a frequent speaker on the subject of women's rights and circulated petitions that helped secure passage by the New York Legislature in 1848 of a bill granting married women property rights. She ruffled feathers with her ideas on divorce and shocked some of her followers by her notions on religion. Stanton's ideas and actions attracted other like-minded women to the cause. Susan B. Anthony, an ardent abolitionist, was convinced and joined Stanton in advocating for women's rights. Stanton, the better orator and writer, was perfectly complemented by Susan B. Anthony, the organizer and tactician.



Susan B. Anthony became the “face” of the women’s rights movement. From 1851 she worked closely with Stanton; planning campaigns, speaking before legislative bodies, and addressing gatherings in conventions, in lyceums, and in the streets. Along with Stanton she organized the National Women’s Suffrage Association.

The National Women’s Suffrage Association (NWSA), founded in 1868, fought for women’s rights, particularly the right to vote. Following the Civil War, the U.S. Congress passed the 15th Amendment which secured voting rights for Black men. The Suffragists were exceedingly disappointed that women were once again denied the vote. Suffrage organizations had lost their momentum during the Civil War and Reconstruction. The cause was taken up again when in 1890, the NWSA merged with the American Woman Suffrage Association. The second wave of Suffragists emerged.

The combined organization was called, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony presided over the combined organization. For the first time Suffragists were



united behind a single national organization. It was within this organization that Anthony, particularly, groomed the next generation of leadership. Carrie Chapman Catt emerged as the leader that NAWSA needed. When she took office for her second term as President, she introduced her “Winning Plan.” The plan was to lobby Congress for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution while still trying to get voting rights on the state level. One member, Alice Paul, differed with NAWSA on what she considered its timid policies. In 1913 Paul and a group of like-minded women formed the National Women’s Party (NWP).

Alice Paul’s leadership in the NWP leaned more toward militant tactics to secure the vote. Paul organized a “stand-in” in front of the Wilson White House. The “Silent Sentinels” were arrested, jailed, and force fed when they went on hunger strikes. Alice Paul was seized and confined to a

prison psychiatric ward. Upon her release, she also organized a massive Suffrage parade in Washington, DC the day before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration. The parade participants were subjected to violence as the police stood by. Alice Paul's tactics served to shine a national light on the Suffragists' cause. The combined efforts of these two associations, NAWSA and NWP, culminated in the Congress passing the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution on June 4, 1919.

Ratification of a Constitutional amendment required two thirds of the states to agree. In August, 1920, the Suffragists needed only one more state to ratify the Amendment. All eyes were on Tennessee. The NAWSA was represented by Carrie Chapman Catt. Alice Paul sent a representative from the NWP. The Anti-Suffrage Association was present, as were the Southern Suffragists and Black Suffragists. All were vying for the one vote that would either change history or validate the status quo.

Sporting American Beauty red roses, the Antis campaigned on the idea that women did not want the right to vote because it would expose them to the rough and tumble life of politics, thus sullyng their virtue. Wearing yellow roses, the pro suffrage groups were arguing that women are equal to men. Therefore, they deserve the right to vote. The Southern Suffragists were arguing for States' Rights to determine if women should vote - making it possible for only white women to vote. Black women believed that the franchise to vote was a route to gaining better educational opportunities. Tennessee legislators donned a rose that signaled how they would vote - red for no and yellow for yes.

A young Harry Burn, a newly elected representative, was wearing a red rose. When the vote to ratify finally came to the floor each side was trying to count the votes. When Harry Burn voted, the entire hall went silent as they tried to understand what had happened. Then peals of joy rang out when the Suffragists realized that Burn had voted yes for ratification. Burn later revealed that a timely note from his mother, Phoebe Burn, advised him to be a

“good boy and vote yes.” With Tennessee voting to ratify, the 19th Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution.

The ratified amendment was not the end of the Suffragists’ political action. Catt challenged,

Our mothers began it. So it came to us as, in a way, a sacred trust. And a great part of our rejoicing today in the hour of victory is compounded by our feeling of loyalty to the past and our satisfaction that we have stood faithful to its trust.

Now that it is all over, the feeling of “ceaseless” is probably the sensation uppermost with all of us, and perhaps it should be. For women cannot stop. The Nation cannot stop. With a new purpose, the purpose of making the vote register for an improved citizenship, the women of the Nation are already lined up under a new name, the League of Women Voters.¹

Instead of becoming a third political party, the Suffragists, who founded the League, decided to become a nonpartisan advocate for democracy. From then until now, the League has been providing information about candidates, their positions on public policy, and educating the community about those policies, without endorsing or opposing any political party or candidate. Charged with being political while remaining non-partisan is no easy task.

Catt’s vision for a new national organization was to be led by a council of state League presidents. At the National American Women’s Suffrage Association Victory Convention in 1920, the delegates “...agreed to reconstitute the NAWSA as the National League of Women Voters.”¹ Having inherited the NAWSA state structure and funding, there were twenty-three state Leagues by 1924. The North Carolina League was established by former Suffragist Barbara Henderson in, or around, 1920.

The North Carolina League of Women Voters exercised its new political power. The members “worked” in the legislature for a mothers’ pension bill; raising the age of consent from 14 to 16 years of age; preventing the passage of a law prohibiting the teaching of evolution; providing for nine months of

¹ Elaine Weiss, *The Woman’s Hour*, (New York: Penguin Press. 2018) 311

school for all children; and supporting bills dealing with child labor laws.”² The North Carolina League was also an early supporter of the unpopular U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision. The League supported school integration and presented those views to the North Carolina Legislature. Leaders also concentrated on improving Voter Services and growing the organization.³ By 1975 there were twenty-one local Leagues in North Carolina.

Dare County North Carolina’s League was formed in the spring of 1987 after an earlier attempt was unsuccessful. Diane Henderson and thirty six Dare County residents founded the first League of Women Voters on the Outer Banks. Their first project was a community workshop, held at the Baum Center, reviewing and evaluating every aspect of life on the Outer Banks, including transportation, water quality, education, and more. The two-day workshop involved over one hundred citizen participants and League members. This successful civics project resulted in a strong working relationship between Dare County and the Dare County League.

Today, the League’s men and women in Dare County are helping to make democracy work. They are educating voters through candidate forums, where local and state candidates can be questioned directly by the voters. Videos of the forums are shown multiple times on local TV and are available through the League’s website. Timely informational programs, on the environment, health care, education, public safety, etc., are offered free to the public. The *Citizen’s Guide*, also free of charge, is published annually, containing contact information on all government services in Dare County. The League provides voter guides, through local media and the Vote411 website. Members also offer informative films and a lecture series featuring U.S. women’s history. The First Friday “Hot Topic” luncheons are designed to inform, enrich, and engage members in small group settings. The Dare County League has been serving Dare County for 32 years.

² “A voice for change: The years 1951- 1995,” (Raleigh, North Carolina: Citizens Education Foundation), 1995

³ A Voice, 11

American women won for themselves the right to vote one hundred years ago in 1920. It took a well-organized campaign of 73 years and countless volunteers' hours to achieve this victory for democracy. The League of Women Voters, begun that same year, has provided the needed educational component to ensure that citizens have the availability of unbiased voter information, giving them the opportunity to cast their ballots intelligently. One hundred years of service, dedicated solely to the notion that our democracy can only function with an informed citizenry is something to celebrate. The women and men of the League of Women Voters will continue to be guardians against political ignorance.

The League of Women Voters joined Alice Paul and the National Women's Party in 1960 to advocate for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. Written by Paul, it reads,

Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

The ERA has been introduced in Congress every year since 1923. The League has collaborated with other organizations to "finish the job" for women's rights. Paul believed,

I never doubted that equal rights was the right direction. Most reforms, most problems are complicated. But to me there is nothing complicated about ordinary equality.

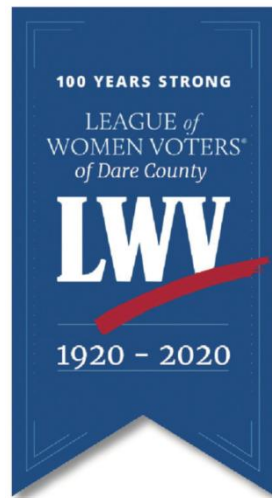


Alice Paul

Footprints and Fingerprints

The League's accomplishments in our democratic government were set in motion ten decades ago. The League's footprints can be seen in the halls of local governments, state legislatures, and in Congress. These footprints are also clear in trial courts, appellate courts, the highest state courts, and in the United States Supreme Court.

Importantly, the League's fingerprints are seen on initiatives regarding representative government, including voting rights and the election process. Apportionment, redistricting, and money in politics remain key elements in this discussion. Equally as important, the League's fingerprints can be seen on initiatives regarding social policy, including equal opportunity, fiscal policy, and healthcare. The use of natural resources is a growing concern in the League's deliberations. In short, the League's work continues.



The League of Women Voters is, and works as, a nonpartisan organization.

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